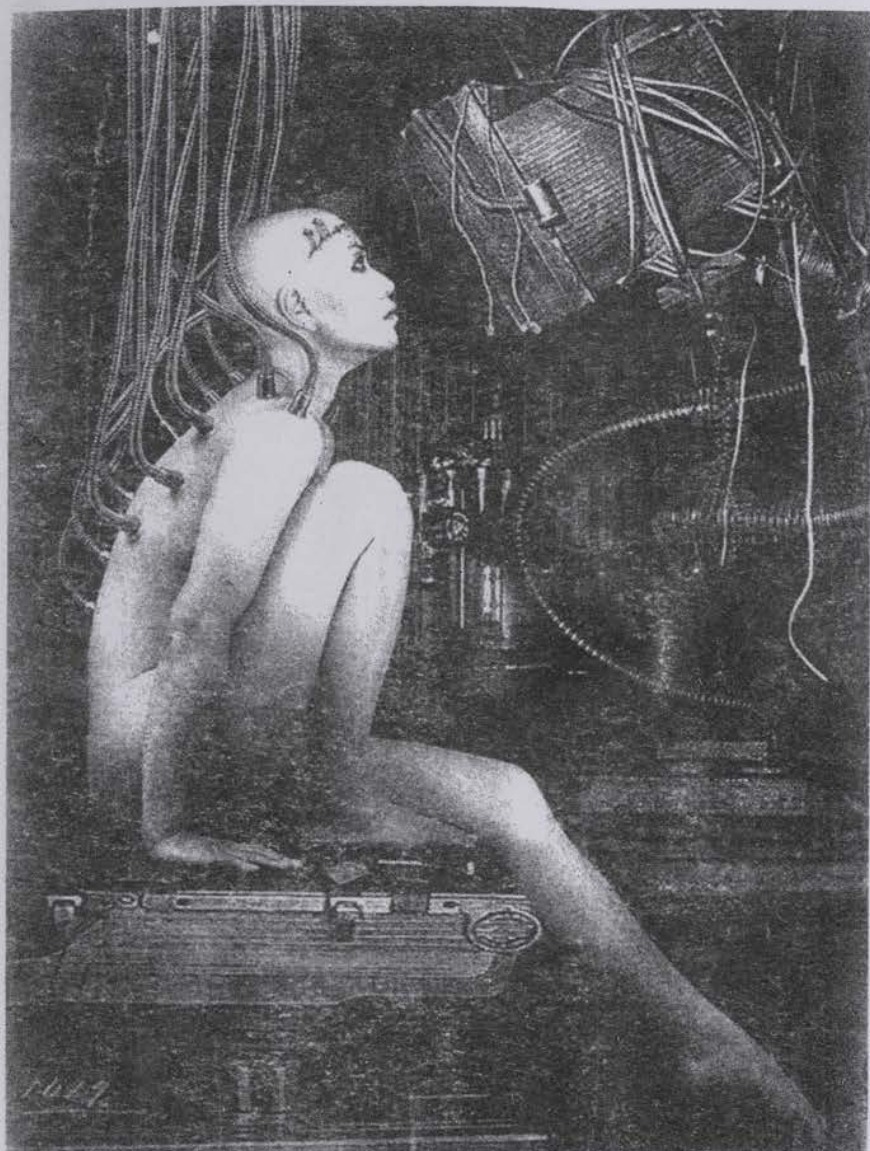


WHAT IS SOCIETY?



What Is Society?

by L'Unique et Son Ombre

Introduction

For a brief period of time in the 1980s, some individuals in France seemed to be taking Max Stirner's ideas in interesting directions. Some of these individuals had been involved in the insurrection of May 1968 in France and had drifted through the milieus of anti-state communist thought. Their encounter with Stirner therefore tended to have a clear vision of the anti-economic basis of his egoism. And a few continued to look upon their project as revolutionary.

Among those exploring these ideas was the author of this piece. He and his partner in publishing wrote a few interesting articles (three have been translated into English) with the promise of many more. Unfortunately, despite their supposed egoism and the implications of much of what they have to say in this article, they allowed themselves to be hoodwinked by certain political vultures of the extreme right in France and have long since ceased to have anything of worth to say. So I have no interest in giving them any publicity here.

Instead, I gladly steal this article, which raises a number of interesting questions, so that the ideas here, separated from the sorry choices later made by the article's writer, can continue to provoke discussion among those who truly do despise all politics and the economy in its entirety.

There are a number of specific points in the text that I definitely do not agree with. I feel that the word "society" can have a number of different and even contradictory meanings, and I would not say that everything that might be called by that word is inherently attached to the economy or to work. Thus, I could see a world in which work and the economy no longer exist, where the ways in which we go about meeting our needs are an integral part of the full enjoyment of life and not a separated activity dominating life, that might still be spoken of as a society. In addition, I feel that the portrayal of anarchism in the article focuses solely on a stodgier version of anarchist ideas and practice, a version that, in my opinion, is missing the essence of anarchy.

Nonetheless, I feel the essay is worthy of critical discussion and exploration. In particular, the ideas raised for further development at the end of the piece could lead to some very interesting explorations. For this reason, with nothing but contempt for what its author has since become, I gladly steal this essay without even considering asking this political lackey's permission, so that it can be put to good use by those who still despise all politics, left or right.

- Wolfi Landstreicher

What Is Society?

“As for the issue of whether or not to continue to reproduce males, it doesn’t follow from the male’s, like disease, having always existed among us he should continue to exist. (...) Why produce even females? Why should there be future generations? What’s their purpose to us? When aging and death are eliminated why continue to reproduce? Even without their being eliminated, why reproduce? Why should we care what happens when we’re dead? Why should we care that there’s no younger generation to succeed us?”

- Valerie Solanas, SCUM Manifesto

When we state that we do not fit into any type of society – past, present or future – the usual response is: “But then you want a world in which people live in isolation?” – as if all relationships between individuals were necessarily social!

Until now, certainly, human beings have always lived in societies. But that, on the one hand, is no reason to live in them ad aeternum; and on the other, there is no society in which all relationships possess a social content, although some of them tend toward this totality, especially the present one. Relationships that cannot be identified as social relationships have always and still do exist. Generally, they are called “intimate” or “private”, which does not convey their true content (or does so poorly) because among such relationships there are those which possess a social content, while others, which certain people call “social”, in fact, are not.

The next step then, is to define what is meant by “society” and “social relationships”.

In order to do so more easily, I believe that it would be useful, before such a definition is attempted, to point out that the “natural”, eternal appearance of society is similar to that of the “natural” and eternal appearance of work.

At the beginning of the seventies, when we (along with others) claimed that it was work that was to be abolished, and not just wage labor, we often attracted the same sarcastic replies we receive today concerning society. Now, however, although all those who disagreed with us at that period remain just as critical, the necessity of the abolition of work as such is quite widely accepted in the “revolutionary” milieu.

Of course it is easier to demonstrate that every activity is not automatically work, and that while other activities coexist with work, a “society” in which work would be excluded from human activities as a whole is possible.

However, to continue to call an ensemble of relationships that excludes

work a “society” is to remain a prisoner of work’s concept of these relationships.

In fact, what is work if not activity whose only goal is to reproduce people by reproducing “external” nature (i.e. what does not belong to them)? This activity prevails over all the rest because it is the most social, to the point of giving birth to a realm that has become autonomous from other relationships—be they social or not—in order to bring together every moment of the material reproduction of individuals: I am, of course, speaking to the economy.

The predominance of the economic realm even implies that the relationships which compose it are the only ones which are generally considered social, whereas the rest are called “private”.

In fact, among the latter, some are social (although of secondary importance), and others are not. Family relationships, through which individuals reproduce themselves by reproducing “internal” nature (i.e. the species), are social because their goal is the reproduction of individuals through social activity.

Like economic relations in general, and those of work in particular, these are not free relationships but obligatory ones. Individuals who establish these obligatory relationships are defined by them: someone is a worker (or an owner) if he or she takes part in the relations of material production. Someone is a mother (or a father) in a family if they participate in the relations of reproducing the species. Someone is a woman or a man if they establish a relationship based on belonging to a sex. Someone is black, white or yellow if they are based on belonging to a race. Someone is French or Turkish if they are born in such and such a territory.

If every individual is a unique being, he or she gives an initial impression of being an undifferentiated member of the species who shares the same vital necessity with other members to the extent that reproduction is the principle goal of his or her relationships with others. Individuality becomes completely dependent on reproduction.

“What was Baudelaire?

*What were Edgar Poe, Nietzsche, Gérard
de Nerval?*

Bodies

which ate,

digested,

slept,

snored once a night,

shat

between 25 and 30 thousand times

*and before 30 or 40 thousand meals,
40 thousand nights of sleep,
40 thousand snores,
40 thousand sweet and sour mouths must
present
50 poems each when they awake;
it is truly not enough,
and the equilibrium between magical production and automatic production is
far from having been maintained; it has been horribly broken,
but human reality, Pierre Loeb,
is not that.
We are 50 poems.
Everything else is not ours but the nothingness
which clothes us,
laughs at us first,
and then lives through us.”*

- Antonin Artaud, letter of April 23, 1947 to Pierre Loeb.

Society, then, can be defined as the totality of obligatory relationships individuals form in order to reproduce themselves materially, physically and mentally.

Thus it can be seen that the abolition of work, like that of the family, means the abolition of a social activity in the sense that its only goal is to reproduce members of humanity. Even if, hypothetically, humanity were not reproduced in an unequal manner (the wage system), the content of work would still call out for its own abolition, as would the content of the family, because we are not 30,000 turds or 40,000 snores, as Artaud points out, nor are we 20,000 legs stretching under a desk or 15,000 sets of dishes. We are 50 poems and 10 accordion tunes (awaiting more). But work, the family and society in a more general sense necessarily presuppose the “alienation” of their products. It is only from a poem or an accordion tune that we cannot be separated because they are useless.

Love

If work and the economic realm in general are often the sole activities that are called “social”, it is because their goal is exclusively reproductive (of society as a whole). Family relationships, on the other hand, possess the social disadvantage of being linked to, and of possibly being invalidated by (loving) relationships that in themselves do not have a reproductive content and do not correspond to social criteria. Individuals do not form these relationships on a basis that is determined by their sex. They leave behind the

sexual community they belong to and come together as unique individuals. A loving relationship is a free relationship and hence asocial.

However, the tie which closely binds the loving relationship to a family one in turn implies that it can be invalidated by the latter. If the limit of the family relationship is always individual, that of the loving relationship is always social—not only externally, through the constant intervention of society in general and its economic realm in particular in order to annihilate the loving relationship, but also and above all internally through the “natural” tendency of individuals who are in love to deny their uniqueness in order to affirm their social/sexual roles (i.e., those determined by belonging to a sex).

It is clearly not the presence of children which determines the existence of family relationships between two individuals belonging to different sexes, but their affirmation (whether they live together or not) of their “male” or “female” roles. Often the birth of children serves to confirm the omnipresence of these roles and gives them a maternal or paternal form. But such a causality is in no way automatic: it is possible to procreate without affirming a family relationship; and family relationships can be affirmed without procreating.

Whether one marries or not does not further clarify whether the content of relationships between “men” and “women” is that of a family or not. Thus, today’s development—people living together without getting married—in no way invalidates this content as such. Instead it is a question of adapting the family to modern society, which has resulted in couples coming together and breaking up in the time it takes to play videotape. Marriage seems like a useless formality in a social sense since divorce constitutes a relatively complicated and costly formality to which couples are having recourse more and more frequently.

This propensity towards divorce is linked to gaining access to social life and attaining material independence, through which women are no longer materially obliged to prolong an unsatisfactory relationship. But it also signifies that an increasing number of couples come together simply because today’s young people are in the habit of having a mixed social life which is granted to them by society. They no longer need to leave their sexual group behind in order to meet someone else. The simultaneously marvelous and anguished moment of discovery experienced by most adolescents has become almost meaningless: it is society which makes them “meet”. If discovery still exists, it is primarily sexual and is itself determined to a large extent by what everyone knows, or believes they know, about sex.

In the past, every meeting between young men and women obviously did not have an exclusively loving content; it was possible for antagonistic relationships to develop from the outset, or later on, depriving women of a social

existence as such, while men played a mediating role. But when women gain access to this social life, it is obviously not synonymous with affirming their own uniqueness, even though this affirmation can at times be more or less hidden behind gaining this access.

Women's access to social life does not bring about a profound questioning of the role of women, and men are even less inclined to question theirs. People who live together and economize on entrance and especially exit formalities behave in ways which are no more those of unique individuals than those of traditional married couples. Anyone who has frequented these new-look couples, either from up close or from a distance, has noticed that they are usually in complete conformity with family criteria and sexual roles, which have simply been somewhat modernized.

More interesting, of course (at least at the beginning), was the approach of individuals whose choice not to marry was an act of revolt when living together did not yet constitute a parallel social norm (although these roles were often reestablished very quickly in these cases as well ...).

No loving relationship is exempt from the presence of masculine and feminine roles and/or maternal and paternal ones. What is important, however, is whether lovers comfortably adapt to them; whether they confirm or invalidate them. To invalidate them is to destroy the relationship of allegiance individuals possess towards their usual presuppositions (in this case, sexual ones): individuals are no longer defined as being masculine or feminine, traits which on the contrary become one element of their uniqueness. The same is true for maternity and paternity.

Authentic love can only bring together unique beings, not a man and a woman, a man and a man or a woman and a woman.

Loving relationships simultaneously go beyond both social and intimate ones. They are intimate, certainly, but cry out the incongruity of their existence in life's social face.

Art

Before its socialization during the second half of this century (a socialization whose premises were apparent right from the beginning), artistic activity was the polar opposite of work. Because it did not play a reproductive role, it was not a necessary activity. It was carried out for the artist him or herself, and only the attractiveness of a work that was freely produced caused a patron of the arts to assist its creator (there were, certainly, works done to order, but most of those created did not fall into this category).

What occurred when art patronage progressively (i.e. as a result of social progress) disappeared during the 19th century is well known: the mythic image of the *artiste maudit* (doomed or damned artist) represents a material precariousness that was very real. The attraction which bohemian life exerted and still exerts on imaginations and memories results from the freedom of its relationships; ones which were free precisely to the extent that they did not become social (i.e., keeping a person well fed).

Also, when we return to the origin of the word, the lives of bohemians, gypsies, etc. are attractive not because of the social content that they presuppose, with its hierarchies and extreme constraints which inhibit individuals, but because of the precariousness of the relationships of a social life that is constantly in motion, giving individuals back the freedom they are deprived of in the tribe.

Crime

Another truism accepted by those who reject each and every asocial viewpoint holds that these viewpoints have no future (since for these folks, the only future is ... a social one) and cannot get beyond crime, madness, and ultimately suicide.(!)

In fact, these are manifestations of human beings' incapacity to identify with any society whatsoever, since human beings are not essentially members of a species and cannot be assigned self-reproductive and social functions as their goal in life without becoming sick or desperate or reacting violently.

Crime is based on an ambiguity if not a contradiction: criminals create activity through which they attempt to reproduce themselves, while still being the free subjects of this activity. In other words, their acts, like work, are determined by a social necessity to reproduce, but they themselves decide the form these acts take. This can allow certain individuals to "transcend" the act of reproduction through crime-as-an-act-of-pure-pleasure. Usually, though, this is not the case and instead the opposite takes place: the social act, absorbing uniqueness, manifests its sordid content through the omnipresence of a vital reproductive necessity which is worse than that of work. The traditional criminal milieu and the various mini-milieus that have more or less replaced it are the social representation of this phenomenon.

This in no way hinders society's obligatory exorcism of what is unique in criminal activity, however weak this aspect may be, and its execution is entrusted to the police and the legal system. The criminal must be deprived of his or her reasons for having done something, and these are replaced by all the reasons which can be interpreted socially (in fact psycho-socially): an unhappy childhood, coming from a disadvantaged milieu, etc.

Thus, in order to re-socialize crime, society is quick to accuse itself of being continually dysfunctional. Prison—the real criminal society—which is based even more on vital necessity and the interchangeability of roles, is where this process of socialization ends up.

What is true for crime is even truer, but in a different way, for crimes of passion. Here we have reached the limits of all the acts of self-reproduction: madness and suicide. Why do people kill? The enigma of acts which are not absolutely necessary hovers over crime.

Everyone who reads classic crime novels, of course, knows the answer: apparently, people kill because of greed, jealousy or resentment. But many greedy, jealous, hateful people have never killed and never will. Why, then, do people kill?

Convinced that an elaborate performance is necessary in order to simultaneously answer and avoid answering this question, society trots out all its actors and props for the occasion: the media, psychiatrists, experts and public opinion join the cops, judges and lawyers in order to erase any meaning which belongs to an act which can then be presented as being the same as hundreds, or in fact thousands, of others, and the person responsible as a lifeless puppet.

But all this is still not enough. If the police, media and legal institutions restore criminals to their proper place in society (prison), placing them back in their class becomes the task of revolutionaries:

“A communitarian association of prisoners—one that goes beyond formally individual reasons for being in jail (reasons which are inherently atomizing)—can only be founded on the basis of a critique of their common proletarian condition, which is the real reason almost all prisoners are in jail and remains with them in prison as on the outside”

“Going through prison walls”, in *Prisonniers de la Démocratie* #1, a bulletin which is close to the journal *La Banquise*.

Where capitalism is content with “formally individual reasons”, the revolutionaries of *Prisonniers de la Démocratie* find them in a proletarian condition which is common to all prisoners (who are thus placed right back into a class perspective which, willingly or not, they had to some extent abandoned). In the same text, on the other hand, a class perspective is criticized, though actually due to its limitation to work relationships. To be obliged to search for proletarian revolutionaries among prisoners demonstrates the weakness of this viewpoint. But proletarians have to be taken where they can be found because, as the text admits, the factories are emptying and the prisons are filling up. What allows the elaboration of a class viewpoint concerning prisoners is a perception that the association in question places them on a path

which is headed directly towards a communist revolution: “Establishing a communist association which goes through prison walls, however, presupposes an indispensable subjective condition: critiquing and going beyond the purely nihilist and individualist anti-capitalist revolt which is characteristic of crime. An ‘individual’ revolt which is not at the same time oriented towards and transfigured and radicalized by the project, love and poetry of the universal human community can only constitute a dead end” (ibid., underlined in the text). A social apotheosis of sorts.

Madness

Through madness, individuals demonstrate that they are no longer able to accept their own social reproduction as the goal of their existence. Contrary to the criminal, the “mad” person does not a priori attempt to practice another form of social reproduction. This difference explains why, in accordance with the division of sexual roles, there are undoubtedly (a few) more women who are mad, whereas there are (many) more male criminals.

Certainly one must be precise about what falls into the very general category of “madness”. But the distance between a nervous breakdown and mental disorder is only one of degree with respect to the increasing impossibility of existing as a member of a society (of any society at all).

To condemn the fact that madness was a product of society (but of a certain society), in the seventies it was often claimed that madness did not exist as such, and that it was a normal response to this society. But if it is possible for such an affirmation to constitute the means of expression of an individual revolt, as in the case of Artaud, its essential goal, on the contrary, is to turn madness itself into a form of social reproduction. This tendency was expressed in antipsychiatry which criticized the repression exerted by psychiatrists and advocated a sort of “self-management” of madness by the “mad”. In principle, this taking charge of oneself was supposed to abolish the barrier between patients and those treating them, thus allowing their socialization within society. This “in vitro” socialization was at times considered a testing ground which would allow a “mad” person to one day rejoin society while at the same time continuing to come to terms with him or herself as such.

A number of clinics, which hoped to be different from and opposed to hospitals and psychiatric clinics, were thus created. In France, the best-known was undoubtedly Laborde’s clinic, notable because of incidents that opposed patients to the anti-psychiatrists who were treating them. These incidents perfectly revealed the function of anti-psychiatry, which was unable to sustain an anti-repressive discourse and practice unless the targeted individuals did not rebel against their “madness” which-has-become-responsible-for-itself,

starting with rebelling against the places where they were being treated.

Laborde was the object of such a revolt, during which a number of patients confronted the anti-psychiatrists who were present, notably a certain Felix Guattari, then famous for his “desiring machines”, through which the negation of the unique individual was achieved in order to make way for the social individual (see “AntiOedipus,” written in collaboration with Deleuze). An entire sector of the ultra-left—the modernist one—took Guattari’s side against the insufferable attacks he was undergoing from several people living at Laborde’s clinic and the rare individuals who supported them (see the debates concerning this question in Informations Correspondance Ouvrieres #120).

Since then, these folks—the modernists—either ended up in the socialist soup in ‘81, or attempted, like Guattari, to assemble the debris of the political and alternative extreme left in order to conjure up a truly leftist tendency in the present... to make a long story short.

As for anti-psychiatry, if it has disappeared from the ideological terrain it is because certain of its objectives have been partially achieved through a number of reforms which have taken place in current psychiatric practice. These reforms are obviously limited, but a certain number of archaisms have been eliminated and it appears that some psychiatric hospitals have become similar to what Laborde’s was like at the beginning of the seventies.

As is usually the case, modern society itself, in its own way, at least partially achieves the objectives of the ultra-left with regards to psychiatry. It appears that in Italy, though, a more direct anti-psychiatric intervention has allowed this movement of modernization to become even more radical: there, with the elimination of psychiatric hospitals, madness is integrated directly into society. Psychiatric evolution in France also appears to be headed in this direction, but at a slower pace because it is obliged to follow the official social paths (see R. Castel: *La Gestion des Risques* Ed. de Minuit).

Madness demonstrates an inability to identify with any society whatsoever. This, of course, is in no way a limitation, except according to every kind of socialist, among whom one finds the very anti-psychiatrists who have attempted to turn madness into a normal outlook through the creation of a mini-society of “crazy people”, and thus a new social role. In this sense, revolting against the role of being mad, like against that of being criminal, allows those who personify these roles to exist as individuals at least to a certain extent. Only then can certain aspects of transgressing social norms present in madness become elements of wonder.

Suicide

By committing suicide, individuals make a radical break with social necessity of any kind. In this sense, it is possible for suicide to give the impression of being the freest action an individual could possibly carry out. In response to the question “Is suicide a solution?” in *La révolution surréaliste* #2, Crevel answers ... yes. Artaud, on the other hand, felt that suicide remains a moment of reality, and loathing any form of reality, thought that suicide could not be anything other than an act imposed on him by social reality. This is the viewpoint he was to develop later in “Van Gogh, suicided by society”. This approach to suicide, and to death in a more general sense, is the most powerful, the most poetic, and at the same time the most deeply thought-out because it conceives of death as a social moment of life and considers both to be equally abominable (this disgust radically distances him from all the modernists—the antipsychiatrists, Telquelien and the rest, who have subsequently attempted to appropriate him).

In fact, the only freedom demonstrated by “my suicide” is not in my choice of death instead of life at one moment as opposed to another, but that I carry it out because I am the only one who can kill myself. Certainly, an act imposed by society that I can carry out immediately (apart from delinquency) is reminiscent of the self-management of asocial acts that we found with respect to anti-psychiatry. Still, one cannot properly speak of self-management, because in order to do so it would be necessary to adopt a schema which is one of social relationships: my act must be lost in the anonymity of acts belonging to everyone. As things stand, my freedom can only make itself known through an act whose origin is not free. But emphasizing the necessary character of suicide while presenting it on the contrary as a chosen act, let us suppose that I, and all the other likely suicide candidates are told how to carry it out. In this case it is no longer I who kill myself, but thanks to the instructions used, an interchangeable member of a group of people who will potentially kill themselves. When I take the amount of little pills necessary to go over the edge, for example, I will be aware that other individuals, at the same instant, or a little sooner or a little later, have gone through the same motions, measuring out the same dose in order to achieve the same result! It’s enough to nauseate you too much to commit suicide!

Thus the goal of the book *Suicide*, *mode d’emploi* (by now it should be clear that this is what I am referring to) is to make voluntary death a social act that gives birth like the one which brought us into this world. To kill oneself—what a beautiful role! The last and the finest! As Leo Malet might have written, have you seen me as someone killing himself?

This confirms Artaud’s viewpoint that suicide is imposed by society even more strongly.

The task of socializing suicide has fallen to the anarchists, just as that of socializing crime has fallen to the communists and of madness to the anti-psychiatrists. Social space is thus hermetically sealed and nothing, it seems, is able to escape from it.

Society is by nature contradictory. According to its criteria, which are those of the reproduction of the species, society wishes to create interchangeable individuals who carry their uniqueness within themselves. It attempts to make them identify with self-reproduction and in order to bring this about, decks it out with playful, subjective charms. This has particularly been the case for the last thirty years with the establishment of a realm of consumption which has now reached its zenith: "I'm me", the advertisements proclaim, offering a pitiful specimen of something which is identical in every feature to any other sample of the same thing. They can even go so far as to claim that "people are unique", while adding "don't spoil it," like the advertisements on the wall of the Parisian subway signed "The Associated Humans". Thus, uniqueness itself is monopolized by Man, who Stirner called the last ghost, which, having replaced God, would prevent the arrival of singular individuals: People Who Are Unique.

The question of social modernity deserves more consideration. For now, it is a question of pointing out that the contradiction that unique individuals cannot be reduced to social relationships is the same one that various communist revolutionaries who wish to abolish the separation between the individual and the community have also tried to resolve. In fact, this separation only exists because individuals cannot be part of a community: the separation is the negative to the positive that non-identification represents. By abolishing the one, they abolish the other.

Wonder

The result would be a society in which individuals would only exist as members of the species but in which their relationships, as in today's society, would be considered free. Such a society would undoubtedly be close to "primitive societies", but would be considerably worse because it would be based on historical social development (and in particular its material development).

Of all the societies that have ever existed, those known as primitive societies are in fact the ones which have obliged their members to identify with them the most. Here individualization is only slightly developed. However, the limited socialization of nature which accompanies these societies allows individuals, however unfree they might be, to relate to nature in such a way as to incorporate it into their individuality and make it an integral part of it. Certainly the community itself presupposes this relationship with nature

and effectively shapes its content. However, even if it is mixed together with community relationships, the relationship between the individual and nature is real and distinct. Whereas the relationship between the community and nature produces the religion of these communities, the relationship between individuals and nature possesses a content that can be called magic, or more precisely, wonder.

We can term a relationship with (external or internal) nature one of “wonder” if it does not reproduce nature or individuals who are involved in it. By integrating nature as an element of their unique individuality, individuals make another reality appear, one which is not a social reality, but rather their own reality. Constantly hidden behind the former, the latter reality cannot appear when the realistic criteria inherent in every society are in place, but only as a sense of wonder which is more or less poetic. This is the basis on which the surrealist movement was formed (see the text “A note on surrealism”).

Although they are mixed together, it is essential to distinguish between wonder and religion in “primitive” societies, because if nature religions have become outmoded with the socialization of nature, religion as such has subsequently developed in ways which are (more and more) social, because every community presupposes one or several religions. Also, wonder is renewed in ways that are more and more individualized, i.e., poetic, although they are less and less effective because the relationship with nature is cut off, but non-identification with society remains profound (the surrealism of the interwar period constitutes the high point of this period and its contradiction).

An extreme potential for poetic wonder now exists that needs a de-socialized relationship with nature in order to manifest itself.

So communist revolutionaries (to get back to them) desire a community that would be in a state of osmosis with respect to individuals, meaning, in fact, that they would only exist through the community.

Thus, the critique of the notion of community complements and perfectly illustrates the critique of society. One of the rare critiques of this notion and at the same time the reality it indicates has been developed by Catherine Baker in her text “From one society to the next (final part)”. In order to properly understand the passage quoted below, it would be worthwhile to clarify the context.

At their request, Catherine Baker, who had previously written a prison abolition manifesto, met the editors of *La Banquise* and *Prisonniers de la Démocratie*. During this meeting, she had a fairly long discussion with Gilles Dauve (Jean Barrot), which, according to her, took place on a level like that of the breaks that customarily take place between “revolutionaries”. Then, wishing to prolong this discussion in a written form, she sent him a letter c/o

the only address in her possession—that of La Banquise, but, of course, clearly indicating the first name of the person it was addressed to since at that point she didn't know his surname. According to Catherine, in any case, there could be no doubt that the letter was addressed to a particular individual. It was then picked up by someone from La Banquise and was read and discussed by a number of members in Gilles Dauve's absence. A little later, Catherine Baker received a response to her letter from a certain Caroline, whom she had never heard of. The latter letter would be printed in *Prisonniers de la Démocratie* #2 as a response... not to Catherine's letter, but to an abolitionist text, "From one society to the next", because, according to *Prisonniers de la Démocratie*, "they both said the same thing"!

This explanation, though of only minor interest, makes it clear that the text "From one society to the next", of which only the part concerning community is reprinted here, represents a clarification concerning the above experience:

"In every sense of the term, society presupposes socializing life and organizing its socialization. A society calling itself libertarian or revolutionary would be just the same as today's, with undoubtedly a new division of power and a desire to do away with protuberances such as the state, law, justice and prison as they now exist. In any other society, however, it would be necessary to recreate them or to find alternative solutions.

We like the idea of sharing. But if my thing can become your thing, because I wish it to be so, it should not become our thing (when I say WE, on the other hand, I am aware that this WE signifies a plural I, not a pronoun representing a group. It is a sign of poverty that language contains only social expressions).

If something is ours, it is neither mine nor yours; no one can enjoy it without the other's authorization. The community, therefore, becomes a third-person guarantor. It is in this manner that the idea of a legal system which "guarantees" the rights of each person (and with the idea of law appears the idea of crime) has been incorporated into every society. The rights of each person are nothing more than rights—in other words authorizations. All the mechanisms of democracy are based on this permanent concession.

The concept of law is incapable of going further. A democratic society that strives to see that "human rights" are respected effectively becomes the best of all possible societies.

It is because common interests must be defended that members of societies (of any type—present or future) find it necessary to adopt a common response to anything which is in a position to threaten them. The question of internal and external "enemies"—that of crime—is thus necessarily raised.

The Guiding Law is Justice (peoples' or otherwise): it judges whether

individuals conform (are innocent) or not (are guilty), but in either case the individuals are judged. It could not be otherwise in a society whose members defend the common interests in question.

By definition a society presupposes its self-organization, in other words an ensemble of rules that governs how it functions.

We affirm that in our opinion it is possible to conceive of people living in a world without a society.

One tangerine plus another tangerine adds up to tangerines, and not to a big tangerine called an orange. Society is this fruit monstrosity.

Today an individual is only seen as a member of a society. This is the source of our isolation, because isolation is contained in the very concept of community to the extent that each person is only a minute fragment of a single complete entity: the community. From this viewpoint then, an individual can only miss other people, not desire them.

In our opinion each person in his or her uniqueness constitutes a totality. Because someone is a totality, their desire to meet other “totalities” can only be an expression of freedom, and not a herd-like determinism.

We cannot be both a totality and a part of a totality. Each person, choosing a conception of unity, moves in the direction of individualization or communion. We then act. It is not the interpretation of these acts which varies (it’s not “just a question of words”), but our acts themselves and our way of living.

The authors of *Prisonniers de la Démocratie*, thus, have a way of going about things which is in accordance with their ideas and have offered an extremely interesting example of the interchangeability of individuals once they belong to a community. Catherine sends a letter to Gilles. The letter is read by people other than Gilles and is discussed within the community. One of its members, Caroline, answers the letter addressed to Gilles (who only learns about it several days later). To top off a communitarian relationship in which anyone can replace anyone else without causing the least inconvenience, a letter signed by Caroline is published as a response to a text which is no longer, in this context, Catherine’s letter.

Thus everything becomes interchangeable. What one person communicates to another person becomes the property of everyone. In the opinion of the community, what belongs to one person belongs to everybody.

This universality is based (and this is what is terrifying) on the assertion of the existence of a bond; it is claimed that people are naturally joined together by what is most common to them: the human species. It is therefore

necessary to become more and more “human”: “And, to the extent that we can know how to love the human species, our body belongs to it” (in “For a world without morality”, La Banquise #1). This sentence is very revealing concerning this desire to abandon everything specific to individuals in favor of the community.

But we are no more interested in having banal bodies than banal thoughts. In our opinion, the only thing that belongs to each person and to everyone is his or her irreducible difference.

We have a mad, reasonable, utopian desire—the only kind possible—to live unique relationships which have freed themselves of any type of social obligation. What is unique is what is different and unusual: what has never existed and never will again. The general principles governing community do not allow relations between individuals unless the community is able, in one way or another, to reappropriate them. What we have stated with respect to the criminal act is therefore true for every act and relationship.

Every unforeseen relationship is banished to “private life”, a realm to which we obviously do not lay claim any more than to a social one. Our relationships will not be limited to either the one or the other. We desire life at its fullest and inter-individual relationships which are always possible and possible everywhere; amongst our friends, of course, but also every time we meet someone (at a later date we will consider the question of chance).

To refuse the social relationships imposed by the functioning of each life within societies is to open up to wonder (at this point we couldn’t care less whether certain words are in fashion or not). Because we need surprise and our need is growing.

Everything in this world is predictable, including its limits and its revolutions. Everything in its proper place. Everything at its proper time. As elements of equations we are unable to experience the unknown in new situations. The people we meet are defined (even if only by inference—“she doesn’t look like this... he’s not that”) even before they can say “I”.

Besides, this “I” usually only consists of the expected representation.

We have chosen the unpredictable. By disentangling ourselves from what binds us to society we make ourselves available for what can happen between you (whether I know you or not) and I. What is possible is the very essence of relationships between individuals.

Every relationship between one unique being and another is potentially desirable. And we desire a world in which the possibility of becoming involved in already existing relationships will be preserved. Thus we exclude any kind

of institutionalization of these relationships. When we become involved in them we transform them, as we ourselves expect to be transformed by them.

The community which a revolutionary society would ideally be presupposes a universal affinity which is said to be part and parcel of the vital impulse of the infamous human species. We are repulsed by the idea of a generalized “feeling of belonging to the same family”. Being a sponge would be preferable.

The entire universe interests us. What takes place between ourselves and the world around us is a mystery. How each person becomes aware of this mystery is unique. Nevertheless this secret can be shared in specific conditions between specific individuals. It is what is specific to each encounter that we choose to safeguard. Relationships between individuals, past, present or future, are not a question of politics, but rather one of poetic creation.

Each time we must invent a relationship that can be compared to no other; one which will allow us to become more and more unique, but not only for ourselves. Isolation is neither necessary nor inevitable. Several people can think together; we could revolt individually or together and perhaps we can even have what some people call “a revolution”. But this would be the subject of another text.”

(Catherine Baker’s text ends here)

Anarchism

Today the anarchist project of abolishing the state has become the axis of every class-oriented critique (regardless of its specific ideology).

Here marxists undoubtedly regain a radical edge which their emphasis on capitalist relations of production had eliminated, given the present low level of class activity within these relationships (whereas during the seventies it was the anarchists who adopted marxist economic analyses instead).

What could be a higher achievement than to abolish the state (that is, all of them)? However, with the exception of certain anarchists, everyone agrees that the state is simply a representation of society (not in a fictitious but in the real sense of the word).

As the illusion developed here would have it, since the state is a product of the division of society into classes, destroying it will allow a society to reunite. It is a question, then, of a revolutionary project which wishes to produce a society devoid of its inherent contradictions.

Well, abolish the state. Create a new society without excrescences of any

kind according to criteria (bringing together individuals on the basis of their membership in a species) that are proper to all societies! You'll find that the contradictions you hoped to leave behind will catch up at a trot and then a gallop: individuals who fortunately do not identify with the species will recreate groups that, as in every society, will be antagonistic. Then there will be nothing left to do but reconstruct a state conflict-management arsenal. If you want a society you get the state too.

In "primitive" societies, founding a real state was not necessary due to the limited extent of socialization present. However, embryonic states which were consistent with their size did in fact exist in these societies—in tribal councils, for example, which represented bodies which were separate from individuals (although these bodies emerged from society in a more direct manner than states as such). These are undoubtedly the kind of decision-making bodies revolutionaries have in mind when they are asked "What should be done with the uncontrollables in a communist society?", or when other people propose direct democracy as a way to run a society.

In these cases, these folks are not minding their own business. If I become involved in a conflict with such and such, it is only my and that person's business, as well as that of the people who will eventually be indirectly affected by the conflict in question. Society, if one still exists, can fuck right off!

However, if revolutionaries are focusing their critiques on the state in this manner, capitalist society itself is putting this critique into practice in its present attempt to short-circuit classes and directly socialize members of the human species.

This subject needs to be expanded upon, along with other questions, such as:

- Every society presupposes divisions between human groups. It is in this mutilated, predetermined manner that the persistence of individual difference expresses itself at the very heart of social relationships. Antagonism between social groups is precisely what allows the accompanying presence of nonsocial relationships.
- The importance' of the phenomenon of *déclassement* (leaving one's class) in history, which is not simply the history of class struggle.
- The importance of the time/space of non-work, which, until the stage of the real domination of society was reached (i.e. before World War 11), was one of encounters between individuals as opposed to simply one of recreation. The city represented the space in which the activities of reproducing the labor force were detoured into the streets, cafes, festivals (especially traveling carnivals), dances and music, expressing the existence of individuals who were both unique and separated

from their social relationships (i.e. Argentinean tango, American urban blues, Parisian cafes in which popular music is played, etc.).

Capitalism, which presupposes itself, constitutes the last possible society because, having replaced nature in every respect, it is society which presupposes itself.

Society therefore tends to short-circuit classes and social groups and to directly socialize the individuals that it obliges to coexist within it. As a result, individuals in dominated social groups tend to be raised to a condition of being social individuals just like everyone else. From this state of coexistence flows a necessity for people to tolerate each other, in other words to put up with each other instead of loving or hating each other. A cool attitude prevails (but one which does not exclude violence of a more or less cunning nature), along with critiques of resentment and violence which fly off in all directions. Also, there is the arrival of youth as a social force, which corresponds to society's need to constantly renew itself because there is nothing left to conquer. This arrival was foreshadowed by Nazism and fascism on the one hand and by the Popular Front on the other, as transitional political forms on the way to the stage of the real domination of society. Now that the period of political transition has been left behind, today (i.e. since the beginning of the Sixties) the social force of youth manifests itself primarily through music, which has become more and more mechanical, technical and lacking in content—i.e. pure Muzak—in accordance with the tendency towards the abstract universalization of capital.

Also consistent with this abstract movement of universalization is a parallel transnational, transracial movement, which is visible in the anti-racist milieu and which, far from wishing to abolish the labeling of individuals according to their race, instead wants to promote it as an integral part of society, similar to, for example, categories based on work.

Today's society is therefore at the same time socialist and individualist.

How can it be abolished?

Sociolatry

By S. E. Parker

These days I can rarely pick up a newspaper, read a book, watch television, or listen to the radio, without being confronted with demands that "Society" should do this, that, or the other. Politicians, priests, social workers, reformers, and revolutionaries, not to mention a good number of conservatives, are eager to urge me to support their panaceas as to what "Society" ought to do to correct some wrong somewhere. This is, indeed, the age of sociolatry, and woe betide those "selfish" individuals who will not join the chorus of supplication to the social idol and plead that its "will" be done.

But although I have looked hard and long for this "Society", I cannot find it. Just as when I sought for "Man", I could only find men, so when I seek for "Society", I can only find individuals. It is clear to me that behind all the clamor, there is nothing more substantial than the mistaken belief that when you and I and several million others form a "Society", there is created an organic entity to which appeals can be made and from which a response will come. Such a belief has no basis in fact. "Society" is no ego that can cause, feel, or will anything. It is an abstract noun denoting a specific aggregation of individuals relating to each other for certain purposes. It is not a supra-individual organism having a life of its own apart from the lives of those individuals who compose it. "Society" is a purely mental construct. Those who worship it are worshipping a spook.

No doubt some readers will retort that "man" is a "social animal" and that without "Society" he would be nothing. I do not deny the usefulness of associating with other individuals in order to satisfy certain of my needs and that this often results in my having a multiplicity of relations with others. If this is all that is meant by "Society", then I am indeed a "social animal". But if from this the conclusion is drawn that these inter-individual relationships themselves constitute a concrete body with demands of its own and that I am, therefore, under an obligation to sacrifice my interests to its, then I regard those who draw it as victims of a delusion who are placing themselves on the same mental level as primitive animists. I am not a cellular part of a deified social "Whole". A cell cannot exist apart from its organism. I can exist apart from "Society"—albeit it at considerable discomfort and inconvenience.

However, I have learned that no belief exists which does not serve some purpose, no matter how foolish or irrational it may be. The sociocentric myth, the belief that I should consider myself a product, and a subordinate part, of an abstraction called "Society", serves the interests of those who have in mind some prescriptive ideal of how I ought to behave and think. It is an ideological

trick designed to deceive the weak, the naïve, and the gullible. To make plain one's own interests does not have the intimidatory power possessed by the invocation of the social god. And as long as the sociolators and the sociocrats are not called upon to explain how such a disembodied idea can have interests, the myth will remain intact for present and future use.

For me, "Society" is simply a means to achieve certain of my ends. It is an expedient, nothing more. It is not the source of my being and my doing. Refusing to be ensnared by the net of conceptual imperatives that surrounds its deification, I am content to be regarded as "selfish"—and find no shame in it.

“To All Deserters.—To the “slacker”, the man or woman who plays “hooky” in the brutal “School of Life”, the sullen being who stands aside and “won’t play”, or who laughs and goes fishing while the world sweats, wars, loves, steals and sinks in the cesspools of business: Prosit!

The cowards are those who are afraid to run away. The brave are those who have the courage to dodge the social draft. That’s the secret wish in your hearts, O uncourageous and pitiful millions—to jump the job, make a getaway, assassinate the Big Boss: Social Necessity.”

Benjamin De Casseres

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